An unusual route

Brockton truck driver is the labor voice for National Public Radio

By CHRISTOPHER COX

He's a trucker with a Class A license, a Teamsters union card – and a gig on National Public Radio.

While the cultural clash may seem like a head-on collision between Mack truck tastes and Volvo values, Tom Sheibley, a rank-and-file member of Local 653 in Brockton and a "Morning Edition" commentator, has straddled the center line.

Since February, the 43-year-old trucker has contributed think pieces to NPR on such hot-button issues as corporate greed, outsourcing and union busting.

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– Tom Sheibley

"I just think I'm another voice," said Sheibley, whose quiet demeanor belies the passion of his radio broadsides. "There really aren't that many commentators – certainly not many truck drivers – who are trying to express working folks' point of view."

There aren't many truckers with backgrounds as unlikely as Sheibley's, a short-haul driver for Roadway Express in Avon. The son of an American Baptist minister, he majored in sociology at Amherst College. He also has a master's in theology from Harvard Divinity School.

"My dirty secret is that I'm a college graduate," joked Sheibley,

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who makes no apologies for holding down a blue-collar job.

"There's a lot of honesty in doing blue-collar work," he said. "...Someone from my background or education could be shuffling money around Wall Street and doing less-honest labor than I do just driving a truck and delivering goods."

Sheibley learned to drive the big rigs at a Quincy tractor-trailer school while still in college. During the mid-'80s he served as an interim pastor in several Baptist churches on the South Shore, but went to trucking full time in 1988.

While he found preaching to be rewarding, his work with the Teamsters' reform movement also brings fulfillment.

"It satisfied my desire to make a difference in people's lives," said Sheibley, "and to address some of the economic-justice issues that the church doesn't always get down to."

Before joining the Teamsters, unions seemed "invisible" to Sheibley.

"That's part of the challenge now," he said. "When people think of making their working lives better, they don't often think of unions. Unions are some odd institution you're a little nervous about."

He acknowledged that the Teamsters, in the public's mind, are still linked to "the wide-body guys," but said the union is reforming old-style locals.

"It's still a battle," Sheibley admitted. "The Teamsters aren't the old Teamsters, but they haven't become the new Teamsters quite yet. We're working as hard as we can."

The Teamsters national office put NPR onto Sheibley, whose opinions previously were limited to letters to newspapers. With a little NPR editorial polish, Sheibley was soon railing away on national radio. He records the 2½-minute pieces, for which he receives $150, at WBUR-FM's studios in Boston.

"There are people who are born for radio," Sheibley said modestly. "I just barely get by."

Bob Ferrante, executive producer of "Morning Edition," believes Sheibley's spots offer passion and perspective: "More than anything else, he brings a reality check of what a normal person goes through day to day."

The commentaries often deal with bread-and-butter economic issues. Sheibley carries a tape recorder as he makes his rounds; inside his radioless truck, there is the time and space to kick around ideas.

"You drive through a depressed neighborhood and see people standing on the street corner and you think: We made things here. We had jobs people could get with a high-school education and some ambition — and we threw them away.

"Corporations have lost their civic moorings," he added. "The people that make the decisions are no longer connected to the communities where the corporation produces its goods or does its work. The old sense of any obligation or responsibility is a lot weaker."

This Labor Day, Sheibley said, he hopes American labor will think about restoring the balance of workplace power.

"At one point we at least had the ideal of a social compact, where working people and management and owners had an economy with fair distribution. No one tried to run away with all the profits. It does seem to have broken down."

Tom Sheibley's commentary can be heard occasionally on NPR's "Morning Edition," which airs locally on WBUR-FM (90.9).